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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 001385

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MOGEROA - ENTERING A SEASON OF POLITICAL
TURBIDITY

Classified by Charge Rick Roberts. Reasons: 1.5
(B&D).

1. (S) SUMMARY: Politically, Nigeria is tense and this probably will not significantly abate in the near future. Opposition politicians and much of the general populace remain disenchanted with the results of the April elections and the irregularities that attended them. Many opposition figures suspect that Obasanjo wants to amend the constitution to allow himself a third term. The North feels estranged believing that ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammedu Buhari was cheated and that Obasanjo is placing Yorubas and Southerners in key positions in the military and government at the expense of Northerners. Meanwhile, the economy is experiencing arrhythmia; the non-oil sector have not seen national growth and government coffers are unusually lean due to lost oil revenue caused by the Warri crisis. Fuel and the prices of many imported commodities are high. Recently the media has been filled with headlines and editorials about political instability. Given this milieu, many people have been expressing concern that the potential for military intervention cannot be ignored. END SUMMARY.

THE CLEAR MANDATE THAT WASN'T

2. (C) President Obasanjo won the presidential election with 62 percent of the vote. His ruling PDP swept the gubernatorial races (28 of 36), as well as the national and state assemblies. On the surface, the results would indicate that Obasanjo and the ruling PDP were popular. However, that is not the case. Neither Obasanjo nor the PDP distinguished themselves during the previous four years in office. Their 2003 electoral landslide was not solely the product of an accurate vote tabulation. Electoral malpractice was involved. While probably winning more votes than Buhari, his nearest competitor, Obasanjo did not genuinely attract 60 percent of the electorate.

3. (C) Moreover several PDP incumbent governors have performed poorly during their tenure. If the elections had been fair, a number of incumbent governors in the PDP as well as the AD and ANPP would have gotten pink slips from the electorate. Given the anti-incumbent sentiment, the PDP, probably should have suffered a net loss of seats. Instead, the PDP scored a significant net gain in the 2003 elections. This has lead some Nigerians and, not exclusively opposition figures, to remark that the 2003 edition overall was the most soiled exercise in the country's checkered electoral history. (Comment: While such statements are inherently impossible to prove, that they are being voiced by a significant number of partisan and relatively neutral observers is significant. As such, this sentiment represents an unignorable political reality). END COMMENT.

4. (C) The PDP could have doused the brewing tension by opting for a "political solution," that would have entailed an agreement between the GON and PDP on one hand and moderates in the key opposition parties on the other to work through the Independent National Electoral Commission or the electoral tribunals to shift some elected offices to the opposition. In exchange, the opposition would have "accepted" Obasanjo's victory and those of most other PDP candidates, thus still preserving PDP majorities in most instances.

5. (S) There were numerous conversations between PDP officials and opposition figures, particularly the Igbo-based APGA and southerners in the ANPP.

President Obasanjo participated in sensitive discussions with the APGA national chairman about "transferring" several National Assembly and perhaps two gubernatorial seats to APGA. However, these talks ultimately were desultory. The PDP decided that the price of relinquishing even some of their most controversial seats was too dear to pay for reducing the opposition's indignation and anger. Thus, the foundation for today's tense political climate was laid. Perceived PDP electoral conniving compounded by the sense that the PDP was flaunting its purloined victories set the groundwork for today's current political frictions.

16. (C) Tension also could have been alleviated had the PDP attempted to consult with opposition leaders and civil society leaders on key issues of substantive governance, trying to form a national consensus around some core issues. Instead, in June, President Obasanjo took two very unpopular decisions. First, he announced the commissioning of a panel to review the constitutional provisions on local governments. This immediately raised suspicions that Obasanjo was setting the stage for a later constitutional amendment that would scrap the present two-term limit, thus allowing him to run in 2007 for a third time. Second, he raised fuel prices. While the move had economic justification; its implementation was callous and apolitic. Obasanjo had neither consulted widely nor put his arms around his public explaining to them why this measure was necessary. The price hike reinforced the impression of arrogance and insensitivity in Aso Villa. GON handling of the ensuing national strike by organized labor and the loss of lives that accompanied the strike further reinforced the perception that President Obasanjo was out of step with the economic challenges that faced the average Nigerian.

17. (C) As if the level of political friction was not sufficient drama, the economic news was not much better. The crisis in Warri has clipped government revenue by approximately 20 percent. The non-oil sector continues to sputter. Agricultural production remains insulated by bureaucratic, infrastructural and financial from significant growth. Unemployment is high, as are the prices of many food staples. There is a general sense that the national economy is veering in the wrong direction or, at the very least, not moving nearly fast enough in the right one.

18. (C) The edge of August may represent another dramatic moment. The National Labor Congress, buoyed by the efficacy of the July fuel strike, has threatened to strike at month's end unless the GON honors its promise to increase wages by 12.5 percent. The strike threat only adds to a feeling of uncertainty and decline that the GON seems unable to arrest, at the moment.

NORTH AND SOUTHEAST: REALLY NOT HAPPY

19. (C) The North continues to emit the strongest anti-Obasanjo sentiment. Northerners see Obasanjo's personnel selections in government and the military as vehicles to marginalize them while promoting Yoruba and southern interests. The last set of retirements within the military were predominantly Northerners who thought they had more years left before they hung-up their uniforms for the last time. While each state can claim a cabinet minister, Northerners decry that the choke positions went to Southerners. Even among Yoruba cabinet selectees, they say Obasanjo discriminated by failing to name one Yoruba Muslim. Additionally, Northerners bemoan the fact that access to government contracts, an important lifeline for the Northern economy, has been stifled. There is a sense that the regional economy is purposely being starved to make people pledge loyalty to Obasanjo before they get a drop of government largesse.

110. (C) Northerners thought to be pro-Obasanjo have been roundly criticized. In a rare manifestation of disrespect and anger, youths threw stones at the usually revered Emir of Kano recently. At the beginning of the year former Head of State Babangida was viewed as a hero and always followed by an adoring throng in his Northern travels. Recently, he too was jostled and stoned. His felony was his non-support of

ANPP candidate Buhari and alleged tacit support for Obasanjo in the 2003 election. Now, many of the rank and file Northerners, especially the young adult males, see Babangida as a sell-out and they oppose him.

11. (C) The beneficiary of all of this is Buhari. People may not be familiar with Buhari's substantive policy positions. However, they see him as the personification of order and discipline. They see him as the "anti-Obasanjo," the man who can bring a sense of direction to replace the growing fear that Nigeria is adrift. There is also a touch of religion and regional chauvinism among the Buhari supporters. They see a national leadership under Buhari as a chance to return the reins of national power to the North, its historic home.

12. (C) Buhari, thus far, has channeled his electoral grievances through the courts. However, there will come a moment of decision for either Buhari or the courts that is freighted with political significance. If the courts decide in favor of Buhari, the entire election and Obasanjo's presidency are in doubt and may have to be redone. By putting the country in such uncharted waters, such a decision would cause a monumental political crisis.

13. (C) This is an unlikely turn of events. The more likely outcome would be that Buhari's petition is ultimately denied by the courts. In that instance, Buhari has told us he would huddle with his followers to determine next steps. However, he has been consistently adamant that he will not discontinue his challenge against Obasanjo. It is likely that Buhari may resume his call for "mass action" against the government.

14. (C) Meanwhile, anger in the Southeast is brewing because the Igbo-dominated APGA did well among the voters but not with INEC vote counters. APGA was probably deprived of at least two gubernatorial seats and perhaps as much as a score National Assembly seats. Fueled by this frustration, Igbo opposition leaders have hastily created institutions such as the Igbo National Assembly, a symbol of non-acceptance of the National Assembly and also of heightened ethnic political fervor.

15. (C) Northern and Southeastern opposition political figures have discussed cooperating politically against the Obasanjo administration and the PDP. Thus far, regional, ethnic and religious differences have limited this cooperation to little more than discussion and some public statements. However, this could change depending on perceptions of Obasanjo's performance in the coming week and months.

THE DELTA - A CAULDRON

16. (C) Nowhere has Nigeria's political and economic distemper been on display better than in the Delta - in Warri. Ijaw militants have held 20 percent of Nigeria's oil production at ransom to their nebulous demands for local antinomy. In some ways, they are the Nigeria oil sector's equivalent of the early days of Columbia's drug baron. As such, this is an uncharted rebellion against the federal government. Moreover, oil bunkering (theft) in the Delta has reached such proportions that the equivalent of 10 percent of legitimate oil production is being siphoned through illicit channels. The wealth and political power that this signifies could be considerable. That the central government has been unable to resolve neither the Ijaw-instigated Warri crisis nor bunkering makes the central government seem weak. This apparent vulnerability may encourage other challenges in the Delta and elsewhere unless the GON takes firm action that weds law enforcement with dire policy consideration of the root political and economic causes of the turbulence in areas of the Delta.

PEOPLE ARE TALKING/THE MEDIA IS WRITING

17. (C) In private conversations and in the print media, the multiple political crisis facing Nigeria are being widely bruited. Editorials in leading daily newspaper and weekly magazines about "political instability" and a crisis of leadership are regular media gruel right now. One magazine even featured a front cover story on a coup plot allegedly foiled in May. Few Nigerians want a return of the military; however people are privately talking about it as a growing possibility if the affairs of state continue as they are.

COMMENT

18. (C) The political climate in Nigeria tends to be cyclical. Currently, the country is in a low trough; some might say a depression. Because of Nigeria's political antecedents, some observers are speculating that the chance for military intervention is slowly moving from slight to moderate. They fear that perhaps the "red light" against military intervention may be replaced by an amber one in the months and perhaps weeks to come unless Obasanjo and his government improve their performance.

19. (C) Unfortunately, Obasanjo has gotten off to a discordant and edgy start. Being his second time around, he should have done better, knowing that this honeymoon would be shorter. The palpable and widespread frustration has turned the alleged electoral mandate into pulp and ash. Despite the level of unpopularity and concern, a military intervention is unlikely. However, Obasanjo has stiff military political opposition that he must face. To get Nigeria out of this current doldrum, he will have to show political and diplomatic acuity, thus far lacking.

20. (C) Obasanjo needs to seek a political modus vivendi with moderates in the political opposition. Then he needs to energize his government to effectively work a few key but important issues like agriculture and employment. Third, he must find a way to safeguard the GON revenue stream by ending the threat to the central government posed by elements in the Delta. None of these will be easy, but unless he makes some heading in these areas, we will continue to hear about Nigeria's instability.

ROBERTS